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Finalist

Short Essay Category

2019-2020 Emerging Writers Contest

Officer Ryan: The Misjudged

Crash, a movie produced by Paul Haggis, shows the audience the lives of multiple characters who are all different races, residing in the city of Los Angeles. In the movie, each character lives a different life, but somehow, they are all connected when they clash with one another. Each character has their own story, but the character that stood out the most was Officer Ryan played by Matt Dillon. At the beginning of the movie Officer Ryan is a static character who later changes for the better and becomes a dynamic character. In the beginning, his character is very racist and heartless, but towards the end he is portrayed as caring and loving man. The way he treats people in the beginning of the movie makes it hard to believe that there is another side to him and that there is hope for his character. Officer Ryan changes for the better and branches away from his initial morals and values. His character helps demonstrate the idea that you can't classify someone under a certain stereotype based upon one action.

Officer Ryan's occupation as a white policeman in Los Angeles is the primary aspect of his character's story. At the beginning of the movie, Officer Ryan and his partner are driving around the city, and Officer Ryan notices a couple in their car who are supposedly performing a sexual act. He then proceeds to pull them over with no real evidence, but with an assumption he made. Once the couple steps out of the vehicle, Officer Ryan sexually harasses Christine in front

of her husband. Christine continues to argue with Officer Ryan and he then threatens to arrest her for lude conduct. The whole time Christine's black husband watches her get harassed, but he doesn't say a word. He even apologizes to the police officer by saying, "Look were sorry, and we would appreciate it if you would let us go with a warning" (Haggis). This scene made the audience have a tremendous amount of disgust towards his character and a lack of sympathy for him. The camera angles in this scene really showed the fear in Christine's eyes by zooming into her face. Also, the way the camera moved while Officer Ryan was touching Christine's leg up and down, really allowed the audience to feel Christine's pain and how uncomfortable she was. Cameron apologized because he knew that Officer Ryan had the authority to put his wife in jail even if she didn't do anything wrong. This was a remarkable scene that really showed the power of white government officials compared to minority groups in Los Angeles.

In this scene Officer Ryan shows how powerful "White Privilege" is. Officer Ryan believes he can do whatever he wants to other races because he is white, and he thinks he has power over them. Christine's husband knew what the officer was doing was wrong and inappropriate, but he decided to stay quiet because he knew he couldn't argue with a white policeman. Officer Ryan believes he is superior to black people and he uses his power as a white police officer to make sure that black people feel as if they aren't as worthy as he is. Also, Officer Ryan is part of a police subgroup, which mean he dresses and has the same values as other policeman. A policeman's job is to serve and protect people. As shown in the movie *Crash*, sometimes policeman allow stereotypes and their power to control the way that they react in certain situations. Both cops in the movie treat black people unfairly because of certain stereotypes associated with black people.

The theme of “race” comes also comes up when looking into Officer Ryan’s character because he is a white male who encounters black people often. Officer Ryan uses his race to his advantage, by treating black people like they have no power compared to him. Officer Ryan’s reasoning for hating black people becomes apparent in his encounter with a black insurance agent named Shaniqua. Officer Ryan comes in to talk about his father’s medical bills and Shaniqua says that they won’t be able to cover any of his medical bill unless his doctor authorizes it. Officer Ryan makes a racist remark by saying, “I can't look at you without thinking about the five or six more qualified white men that didn't get your job” (Haggis). This remark is not only racist but also degrading towards females. At this point, the audience hates his character even more, especially black females. Officer Ryan thinks he can get whatever he wants because he is white, but when Shaniqua declines his request, he calls her unqualified and not worthy of her job because she is a black female.

Officer Ryan is part of the male subgroup, who believe that they are superior to women. In both situations with Shaniqua and Christine, Officer Ryan treated the women as if he was superior to them and had no respect towards them. He then says, “Thirty years he worked side by side with those men, sweeping and carrying garbage. And then the city council decides to give minority-owned companies preference in city contracts. And overnight, my father loses everything. His business, his home, his wife. Everything! Not once does he blame your people” (Haggis). Finally, the motivation behind all his actions is revealed and the reason why he hates black people is because minority owned companies were favored by the government and that caused his father's business to fail. In society's stereotypes, black people are associated with gangs and criminal activity. After his father's business failed, Ryan sees all black people as criminals, and he tries to hurt them like they hurt his father. Officer Ryan is influenced by

society to hate blacks because of stereotypes and he lacks knowledge outside his own race. A key term associated with Officer Ryan is Othering which “refers to the labeling and degrading of cultures and groups outside of one’s own” (Riggins 3). The fact that he refers to black people as your people and white people as my people, is very degrading towards black people because he thinks he's better than Shaniqua and other blacks. As Officer Ryan is leaving Shaniqua's office, he is shown walking out slowly and its very dark and there is a red light shining which symbolizes how angry and stuck he feels.

Up until this point, the audience despises Officer Ryan’s character and the audience has little hope for him changing. The first time his character is portrayed as being a caring man is when he is shown taking care of his father at home who has trouble using the bathroom. He really cares for his father and tries to do anything he can to try to help him and often he takes his anger out on black people because he blames them for his father’s illness. The next scene that Officer Ryan appears in is a surprising one. Christine, the lady that Ryan previously harassed, is involved in a car crash and she is stuck in her car that is about to catch on fire. Officer Ryan arrives at the scene and runs towards the flipped over car. When Christine sees that Ryan came to her rescue, she tells him to get away and send someone else, but he refuses to leave. Then there is close shot of gas leaking out from the car and a flame starting, which creates a sense of danger. After a couple of seconds, the car starts to catch on fire and the other officers pull Ryan out from under the car. Ryan refuses to let Christine die and he risks his life once again and goes under the burning car to pull Christine out. At this moment he must touch Christine in order to save her and Christine finally trusts him, and this gives the audience reassurance that Officer Ryan really isn’t a bad person. During this scene there is very dramatic music playing in the background, which intensifies as the gas starts leaking and causes a flame. After Ryan pulls Christine out

from under the car, in the background Christine's car blows up and there is an enormous explosion. This explosion caused the audience to realize that there would have been no way Catherine could have survived if it weren't for Officer Ryan. For the first time his character is associated with the term "hero." Officer Ryan becomes Catherine's hero because he saved her life from the burning car, while risking his own life. Officer Ryan's character wasn't always bad, he always had a good heart deep down, that was willing to sacrifice everything. He often came off very rude and aggressive because he had all this anger built inside of him for black people, who caused his father's business to fail. However, in certain situations he managed to put that anger aside and not focus on the race of the person, but that fact that they needed to be saved.

Crash is a film that show the lives of many realistic characters who each have their own flaws and make lots of mistakes throughout the movie. Everyone makes mistakes in their life and one bad decision doesn't identify someone as a "bad person," but what really matters is how they choose to handle their mistakes. They can either continue making the same mistakes or learn from their mistakes and better themselves just like Officer Ryan did. Often society will judge someone based one mistake and classify them under a certain stereotype, and that person must spend their whole life trying to prove that they have changed. Officer Ryan's character trajectory changes with the different interactions he has. Although, Officer Ryan acts like a coward and heartless person when taking advantage of Christine and questioning Shaniqua because of her race, he can't be classified under the stereotype of being a nasty white policeman because of these two interactions. Towards the end, he redeems himself and shows that he cares for people despite his past actions. Often stereotypes are unfair because they only represent a portion of the people and not the whole group. No matter how much someone tries to be a good person, if they

are classified under a bad stereotype, then it's very difficult for them to act as a good person, when everyone else views them as the bad guy.

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